

Farah Bakaari

Vincent Benlloch

Barry Driscoll

March 22nd, 2021

Political scientists talk about African 'Big Men' inconsistently

0 comments | 9 shares

Estimated reading time: 5 minutes



Over the last two decades, the use of the 'Big Man' concept to explain the complexity of African politics has grown steadily. Yet new research shows that the concept's application is frequently inconsistent. A large dataset of published articles sheds light on the usage of 'Big Men' and the way its notions of accountability can be particularly understated.

The Big Man is an enduring figure in much of sub-Saharan politics. He is often imagined as a greedy and unaccountable despot who rules with violence.

Consider the 2014 documentary *Big Men*, backed by Brad Pitt, which tells the story of American oil executives in Ghana and Nigeria. The Americans are supported by African elites whose greed supersedes the human and environmental destruction caused by oil. It's an interesting documentary, which despite its title has little to do with Big Men.

The imprecise language around Big Men is also found in social science. A manifestation of personal rule in a patrimonial regime, the Big Man has become a conceptual workhorse for social scientists trying to explain the diversity and complexity of African politics to students, policymakers and interest groups – a sort of a sub-continental signifier for a readily accessible and explainable Africa.

As a result, the invocation of Big Men both in popular representations and social scientific research has increased significantly in recent years though in less than precise ways. Articles in popular and mainstream media often confuse Big Man Governance with immovable strongmen, like Angola's Jose Eduardo dos Santos or Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo of Equatorial Guinea.

What is the Big Man in 'Big Man Governance'?

A Big Man is an apex figure in a patrimonial governance regime. We argue that there are five key features of Big Man: 1) his role is (informally) rule-bound and accountable; 2) he maintains authority through reciprocity not violence; 3) he is predictable not arbitrary; 4) he uses public resources for club goods rather than for public goods or private gains and 5) he connects small men to power and, therefore, is decidedly not elite based.

Research into use of Big Men by social scientists

Wanting to know more about this inconsistency between these five features of Big Men and how social scientists deploy the concept, we decided to **study it systematically**. We created an original dataset covering discussions of Big Men in 11 leading English-language African Studies journals since 1980. 268 articles were ultimately selected based on how often authors used 'Big Man' or 'Big Men' in the text, with a minimum threshold of three uses. Each of the articles was then coded based primarily on how the Big Man was described, based on six distinct descriptors: accountable, dictator, thief, redistributive, personalistic, neopatrimonialism.

Our research was specifically interested in whether scholars explained to the reader the features of Big Man Governance; we were not interested in whether

the scholar's specific case study was itself representative of the Big man ideal type.

The big picture data

We found that interest in and use of the Big Man as a concept has grown steadily over the last two decades, especially among political scientists, anthropologists and historians. Regionally, discussions about Big Men are focused on Nigeria, Ghana and Kenya and, thematically, much of the scholarship invoking Big Men concerns itself with elections, regimes and political violence (Figure 1). When we broke down the way Big Men are described according to the article's topic/theme, we found political scientists are especially likely to talk about Big Men as thieves or dictators if violence or land are the author's subject.

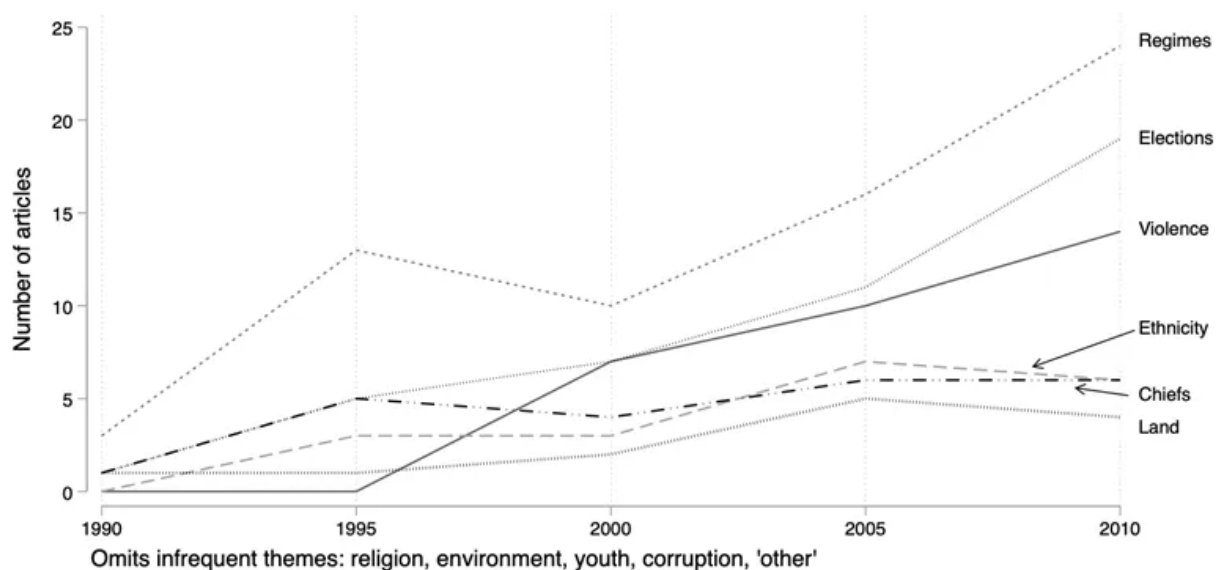


Figure 1: Big Man themes over time.

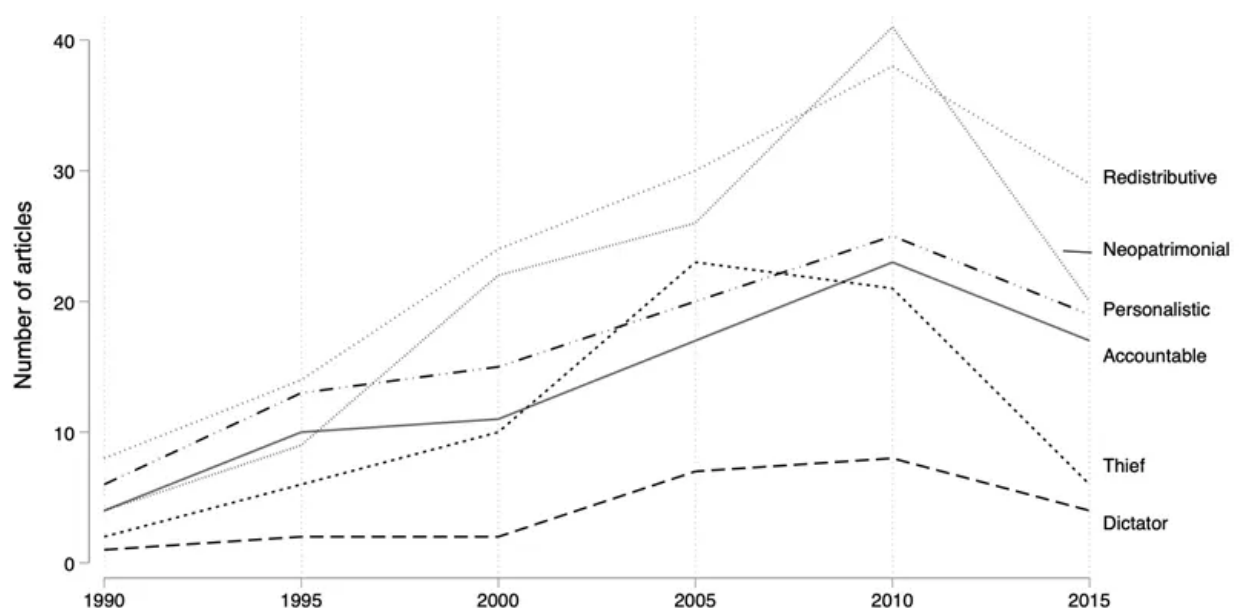


Figure 2: Big Man descriptors over time.

The two descriptors most commonly associated with Big Men are 'redistributive' and 'neopatrimonial' (Figure 2). At first glance the popularity of these two descriptors is encouraging, given that true Big Men are apex figures in neopatrimonial regimes that revolve around redistribution and reciprocity to a network of loyal constituents. Less encouraging, however, was the discovery that one-third of the entire dataset describes Big Men as dictators or thieves. These findings suggest a jockeying for position between the Big Man Governance and Big Man Dictator models, where the latter is unaccountable, despotic and often violent.

Political scientists, take note

Our research also bore out another notable finding: political scientists particularly understate the accountability of Big Men. The share of political scientists describing Big Men in terms of accountability (27%) is significantly lower than in the broader dataset (36%). Towards the end of [our article](#) we present some illustrative examples from fieldwork conducted in Ghana's local governments, which shows how Big Men are actually embattled figures who constantly struggle to keep their 'small men' happy.

We also wanted to distinguish between articles in which Big Men were the authors' central focus versus those simply mentioning Big Men in order to situate their research. We coded whether authors talk about Big Men in the main body of their article, or only in the literature review. Our statistical analysis found that authors are 20% less likely to correctly describe Big Men as accountable if the authors only discuss Big Men in their literature reviews. Importantly, this finding was only true if the author is a political scientist.

Our research throws into relief the inconsistent treatment of Big Men in African Studies. The results lead us to call for putting the Big Man back in his place, as a dominant figure who is empowered by, and thus indebted to, those beneath him.

About the author



Farah Bakaari

Farah Bakaari is a doctoral student in Literatures in English at Cornell University and a graduate of Grinnell College.



Vincent Benlloch

Vincent Benlloch is an incoming law student at the University of Michigan and a graduate of Grinnell College.



Barry Driscoll

Barry Driscoll is an Assistant Professor of Political Science at Grinnell College.

Posted In: Politics | Recent | Research Methods

Leave a Reply

Enter your comment here...

Read Next